

Sempre le Montagne: Early Italian Settlement in North-East Victoria's Ovens Valley

by Jacqueline Verrocchio

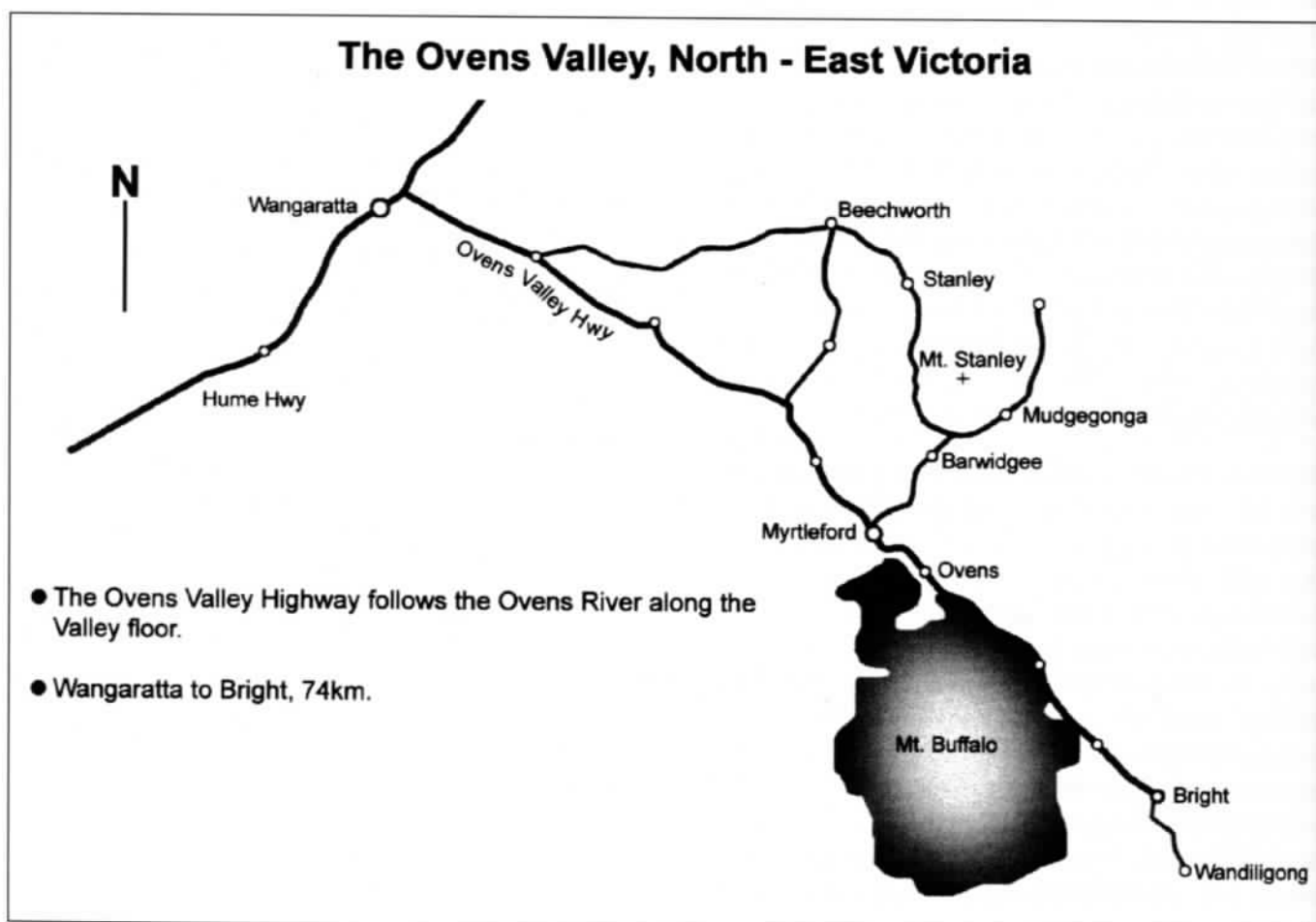
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As one drives through the Ovens Valley in Victoria's north-east, it is easy to read the signs that this is a very Italo-Australian part of the countryside. Letter boxes read with Italian names, there are orchards filled with chestnuts trees, and many houses have their own small vineyard. In the streets of Myrtleford, it is not unusual to hear Italian being spoken between friends and business acquaintances. Once the scene of gold rushes during the 1850s, the Ovens Valley is agriculturally rich. Diverse agricultural pursuits range from tobacco farming to orchards and hops. The upper Valley, from

Myrtleford to the township of Bright, is dominated by spectacular alpine scenery, where in winter, the peaks of Mount Buffalo, Feathertop and Bogong are capped with snow.

Although the Italian population of the Ovens Valley has been greatly boosted by post World War Two immigrants, there had been many Italian arrivals here during the 1920s and 1930s. The earliest Italians, however, those who could be considered the pioneers of Italian settlement in the valley, arrived far earlier, with the gold rushes of the 1850s and 60s. A small but intre-



A map of the Ovens Valley.

pid number of adventurous young men came from the Swiss-Italian Canton of Ticino, from the Valtellina in Lombardy, northern Italy, and from the neighbouring Swiss Valley of Poschiavo. Though few in number, as trail-blazers for successive generations of Italian immigrants, the impact of this small group on the future settlement patterns of the Ovens Valley could not have been more significant.

The question of what inspired these emigrants to leave their homelands, and what brought them eventually to settle in north-east Victoria, is a story of relatively unusual circumstances. The answer lies in a few slender details relating in part to the propaganda of some Swiss shipping agents, and how these emigrant people from the European Alps were able to find for themselves a new high country in Australia.

Jacqueline Templeton has noted that 'Australia was not a very popular destination for Italians in the nineteenth century'. In fact, at the time of the 1871 census, when persons born in Italy were counted separately for the first time, only 1772 Italians were recorded in Victoria.¹ Nevertheless, of the even fewer Italians who found their way into the north-east of Victoria, most, it would seem, travelled to Australia on English clippers. Often they departed from the northern port of Liverpool on the 'White Star' line of British and Australian packets. Through the late 1850s and early 1860s, the White Star ships sailed from Liverpool to Melbourne twice a month. The fame of the north-east Victorian goldfields was well publicised by such shipping lines, agents promoting the dream of striking it rich as a means of increasing ticket sales. One White Star clipper was even named *Beechworth*, after the town that formed the administrative centre of the Ovens gold fields.²

One emigrant to travel on a London-based clipper, the *Yorkshire* arriving in Melbourne in April of 1860, was the Swiss-Italian Antonio Masciorini.³ Only seventeen or eighteen years old at the time of his departure, Masciorini had been born in the village of Gudo, near Bellinzona, in the mountainous Swiss Canton of Ticino.⁴ In the same month, Giuseppe Costa, a twenty five year old from the Poschiavo Valley, in the neighbouring Swiss Canton of Grigioni, arrived aboard one of the well-known White Star clippers, the *Red Jacket*.⁵ In April of the following year, the *Red Jacket* docked once again in Melbourne.

This time it carried northern Italians from the Valtellina region, another rugged alpine valley, located on the Italian side of the border. The passengers included Pietro Pini, from the village of Grosio, on the Adda River.⁶

What motivated these men to migrate to Australia? Without doubt, as a destination, the gold fields of Victoria beckoned hedonistic young adventurers desirous of seeking their fortunes. However, as David Goodman has observed, historians have had a tendency to naturalise the decision to migrate to the Australian goldfields, 'as though it were the most natural thing that men should leave all that was valuable to them in one part of the world, to seek for precious minerals in remote regions about which they knew little'.⁷ In reality, a complex mix of economic and political circumstances on the home-front, rather than the opportunity to mine gold, provided many reasons to emigrate.

In Swiss Ticino, the peasants had long been squeezed by the interplay of poor land and lack of capital. They had survived partly by performing seasonal work in nearby Lombardy (then part of Austria), but in 1853, fearing Swiss sympathy for the Italian independence movement, Austria closed the border and sent 4000 Ticinesi home. The economic blockade reduced many Ticinesi provinces to desperation.⁸ Meanwhile, in the neighbouring Poschiavo Valley, a similarly desperate economic situation prevailed.

Across the border in Italy, the Valtellina was, like the Ticino, an agriculturally poor region. Here, farming was comprised mainly of vineyard cultivation. However, laws of inheritance specifying that farms be divided equally among heirs had meant that agricultural land had been fragmented into many separate plots, often too small to provide individual farmers with a satisfactory living. Consequently, as in Ticino, the farmer of the Valtellina had sustained themselves by undertaking seasonal work. In nearby provinces, cotton and silk industries had provided such employment. However, during the 1850s, several excessively poor seasons, followed by the virtual destruction of the region's vineyards due to a vine parasite, devastated farming families. To worsen matters further, a silk worm disease impacted badly upon the silk spinning and weaving industries that had provided seasonal employment. Other political factors also contributed to the general desperation of these farming communities.⁹

It was in these circumstances that Swiss shipping agents became deeply involved in the process of promoting Australia as an exciting destination for prospective immigrants from the Ticino, Grigioni and Valtellina regions. Since 1851, when gold had been discovered in Victoria, European shipping companies had benefited from a substantial trade, transporting people to and from the Victorian goldfields. However, after a few years, they were looking for new localities in which to recruit emigrants to fill their boats. The companies began to target certain regions of the Ticino, in systematic campaigns to recruit emigrants.¹⁰

Between early 1854 and mid 1855, 'An intense propaganda was conducted through advertising in the local press and, in certain towns, company representatives were sent to establish networks of agents'.¹¹ When passages to the Victorian gold fields were advertised, 2000 men responded, raising their fares through mortgages or loans. Consequently, by 1857, the majority of 'unidentified' Europeans on the gold fields were Swiss-Italians from Ticino.¹² However, once in Australia, many of these Ticinesi found themselves poorer than when they had left. Before long, Ticino was flooded with negative reports from Australia, and the desire of locals to emigrate ground to a halt. The shipping agents moved on.

By early 1855, passages to Australia were being advertised in the Poschiavo Valley. Here, newspaper advertisements had claimed that very attractive wages could be earned in Australia by even the humblest of trades persons. Consequently, between the late 1850s and the early 1860s, a very small emigration from the Valley occurred.¹³ More significantly though, in the Valtellina, the people were exposed to the activities and propaganda of emigration agents operating in the Swiss towns just across the border.¹⁴ Substantial migrations from the Valtellina were the result.

Once in Australia, these emigrants met with little success on the gold fields, and quickly took up work as labourers. Unlike the majority of Victoria's Ticinesi emigrants, who settled together in the Daylesford-Yandoit area,¹⁵ Antonio Masciorini went travelling around the colony. Sharing a common language, the young Masciorini, and the equally young Peter Pini met up. They travelled to Gabo Island, as remote and desolate and island wilderness as to be found, located off Victoria's far eastern coast. Here, Pini

and Masciorini were set to work building the Gabo Island lighthouse. With wind and rain their constant companions, day by day they constructed its monumental fifty-five high henna-hued granite tower.¹⁶ This work was completed in 1862.

Most other work undertaken by these emigrants was of a more pedestrian variety. Drawn to the gold fields of central or north-east Victoria, many Italians would work at wood cutting and splitting, or at burning charcoal, at which they could earn a little more than unskilled labourers. In time, a few could buy horses and set up businesses as timber or carting contractors.¹⁷ Those who would eventually settle in north-east Victoria followed such a pattern.

Returning from Gabo Island, Masciorini worked in Bendigo as a miner, and then in Chiltern for a short time as a contractor.¹⁸ Giuseppe Costa apparently also went to Bendigo (Emu Creek), where he worked as a charcoal burner.¹⁹ The charcoal was supplied to blacksmiths for use in their forges. Other Italians included Gaetano Pastorelli, who provided supplies to miners while based in the Beechworth-Stanley area, and Victor Pini from Vernuga, a village in the Valtellina, who also burnt charcoal in Chiltern.²⁰

Eventually settling in a small mining town known as Growler's Creek (now Wandiligong), Masciorini was able to establish a retail trade, opening a tobacconists next to the aptly named Alpine Hotel.²¹ His grandson, John Masciorini, believes that of all the places in Victoria, Antonio Masciorini probably settled in this narrow picturesque alpine valley because it reminded him of his home in Ticino.

Around 1863-64 other Italians also made this mountain valley their home. Battista De Piazza and his cousins Giovanni Trinca and Robustelli, had travelled from Grosotto in the Adda River Valley, Valtellina, arriving in 1863 on board the *S.M. Vittorio*. Unable to find work in Melbourne, the three cousins walked the 300 kilometres to Wandiligong, probably via the bustling gold town and administrative centre of Beechworth.²² In Wandiligong, De Piazza and Trinca, seventeen and nineteen years old respectively, found work gold mining.²³

Writing about such emigrants from the Valtellina, Jacqueline Templeton has discovered that between 1861 and 1871, of 14050 persons liable

for military service in the province of Sondrio, 393 were identified as having absented themselves. Conceivably, Battista De Piazza and his cousins may well have been among the twenty-three people from Grosotto who absented themselves deliberately in order to avoid military service. Simply, 'Avoidance of military service had always been a strong motive for young men to emigrate', and north-east Victoria had already become home to many emigrants avoiding military service in their own country, including Germans who had fled from the Crimean War.²⁴

After some time in Wandiligong, De Piazza became a carter, transporting quartz from the mine to the crusher at Morse's Creek (Bright), on the account of the mining magnate John Wallace. Before long, he had saved enough capital to purchase a horse and dray, and then he carted quartz for himself.²⁵ A Swiss-Italian, Carlo Lardi, also worked at Wandiligong as a carter, and as a mine contractor, timbering Gill's Home Reef mine, and running the Garibaldi mine.²⁶ The naming of a gold mine 'The Garibaldi' suggests that Lardi, and other Italians in the area, although living in Australia, still held an interest in Italian politics.

But these men had not remained in Australia merely to engage in low-paid manual labour. Instead, what motivated them to stay in north-east Victoria were opportunities to escape poverty, to become financially prosperous, and to make a better life for the families and themselves.

Aside from wine, timber had been the only significant export from the Valtellina.²⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that some of these immigrants established themselves in the familiar business of sawmilling. Among the first of this group to enter into the sawmilling business seems to have been the Swiss-Italian Giuseppe Costa, who purchased the Beechworth steam sawmills in 1864 from another Swiss, Louis Chevalier.²⁸

Having already worked at a sawmill in Ovens, De Piazza moved to Beechworth, where eventually he bought a sawmill in partnership with his cousin Giovanni Trinca.²⁹ The mill was located not far from Beechworth, at the gold mining town of Snake Valley (Stanley). Situated on a hilly plateau some 700 metres above sea level, here they would have found that dustings of snow in winter are not wholly uncommon. Densely forested with peppermints and other

Saw Mills, Waterloo.

Pini and Company,
BEGS to inform their customers and the public generally that they have now on hand a
Large Stock of Timber of
all sizes,

Which they are prepared to deliver in all parts of the district. Excellent timber, suitable for Wheelwrights, including Messmate, Stringy Bark and Mountain Ash always in stock, at a greatly reduced price.

Orders left with Mr Lardi, Wandiligong, or addressed to Pini and Co, Post Office, Myrtleford, will receive prompt attention.

IN the TRUST ESTATE of A. MASHEORENY.

MR CARLO LARDI having purchased the whole of the assets in the above estate, all debts remaining unpaid to this date must be paid to Mr Lardi, or to his authorised agent, Mr A. Masheoreny, and their receipt will be a sufficient discharge.

DANBY & GILMOUR,
Agent for the Trustee.
Melbourne, May 10th, 1881.

NOTICE:

ALL accounts due to above Estate must be settled at once, or else will be sued for without further notice.

CARLO LARDI.
Wandiligong, May 11th, 1881.

Eucalyptus, the surrounding mountains served their interests well.

After a disagreement with Trinca, De Piazza acquired his cousin's share of the sawmill, and went into partnership with Pietro Pini, and Antonio Cramereri, yet another Swiss-Italian from the Poschiavo Valley, who had worked as a teamster after arriving in Australia in 1856.³⁰ By 1875, the three were operating as sawyers 'Pini, De Piazza and Co., Back Creek, Stanley', supplying timber to the area around Beechworth and Myrtleford. At the same time Pini was also operating a mill in Ford Street, Beechworth. The partnership between Pini and De Piazza continued at least until 1880.³¹

However, not all the men went into the sawmilling trade. In 1867, Antonio Masciorini had purchased a drapery store in Wandiligong, where he would stay for the next thirteen years before moving to nearby Bright.³² In 1881, Carlo Lardi took over this shop, converting it to a general store where he sold items ranging from mine explosives to fruit.³³ Lardi also bought out another store, added a wine and spirit license to his enterprise, and established fruit and nut orchards after purchasing adjoining blocks of land. Although some of the fruit was bottled, many of the apples were packed and sent to market in Melbourne.³⁴

Opportunities to establish businesses aside, marriage really helped to settle these emigrants, financially as well as emotionally. In a study of the Ticinesi in Australia, Gentilli has stated that the main problems for these men in their efforts to become established financially were ignorance of the language and a lack of capital.³⁵ While capital could be saved, English-speaking wives would have helped these men to advance their knowledge of the language and to conduct business transactions.

As early as 1857, Beechworth's *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, reporting on the wedding of Gaetano Pastorelli to Catherine Boylan at St. Joseph's in Beechworth, had made special note of other marriages between Italian-speakers and the Irish. Battista De Piazza had met his future wife, Catherine O'Brien, while she had been working at the Ovens Valley Hotel. The two also married at St. Joseph's, in 1870. Carlo Lardi had also married an Irish girl, Mary Tully, some years before, in 1862.³⁶ At such a distance from

Italy, the men probably were comforted in the fact that these women were Roman Catholic. Still, not at all Italian in north-east Victoria married Irish women. In 1867, Pietro Pini married Amanda Dubois, a French immigrant who had come to Australia by way of the Californian gold fields with her parents. Giuseppe Costa married a Scot, Sara McTavish.³⁷

While sawmilling around Stanley, the De Piazza family took the opportunity to select land at Mudgegonga, an area of rich rolling hills in the Barwidgee Creek Valley (a tributary of the Ovens), just north of Myrtleford. Under the Land Acts, the 'selector' had to pay 1 pound per acre, but also live on the land, cultivate 10% of it, and improve it to the value of 1 pound per acre. The family worked hard, clearing and fencing the property, and in 1878 they built a substantial twelve-roomed house which they called 'Orange Grove'.³⁸

Significantly however, De Piazza was not the only Italian to select land at Mudgegonga. Pietro Pini selected land adjoining 'Orange Grove', while other Italians, Giuseppe Osmetti, Stefano Saligari and Victor Pini, also selected land in the Mudgegonga-Barwidgee Creek area. All the men had grown up within only two or three miles of each other in the Adda River Valley.³⁹ Their selections at Mudgegonga ensured the beginnings of a small Italian stronghold. Battista and Catherine De Piazza later bought Saligari's land.⁴⁰ Together they built a mixed farming enterprise which was to be the showcase of the district: the property featuring orchards, vegetable crops, tobacco, hops, kilns and drying sheds, a herd of sixty dairy cows, and an output of 200 pounds of butter per week produced using imported equipment.⁴¹

While Masciorini and Lardi maintained substantial retail interests, Pini, De Piazza and Cramereri, continued to operate sawmilling businesses at Mudgegonga through the 1880s and early 1890s, expanding the area they supplied to include the whole Ovens Valley.⁴² The combination of mining, property, retail, farming and sawmilling interests brought these men a security and prosperity they probably could only have dreamed of in their native lands.

It is difficult to know whether some of these men knew each other prior to migrating to Australia. Evidence suggests that Carlo Lardi and Giuseppe Costa actually knew one another in



A recent photograph of Carlo Lardi's Store, in Wandiligong.

Switzerland, having served in the army together.⁴³ Pietro Pini may have known Battista De Piazza in Italy: born in villages situated only a few kilometres from one another, it seems more than coincidental that they ended up neighbours in Mudgegonga. Nevertheless, once settled in the Ovens Valley, it is clear that these men maintained business relationships, and probably also friendships, over many decades. In 1881, Carlo Lardi took over Antonio Masciorini's Store in Wandiligong.⁴⁴ In the same year as taking over Masciorini's Store, Lardi also becomes an agent for Pini and Company's saw mills.⁴⁵ Pini, Cramereri and De Piazza also appear to have maintained business contacts in the sawmilling trade over a long period.

In north-east Victoria, the substantial modern-day Italian presence was preceded by a handful of Italian settlers, comprising energetic young men who, once in Australia, built prosperous lives for themselves. Although they were too few in number to form a strong regional enclave, these people did create a sense of community, selecting land near one another, and maintaining business and social contact over many decades. Ultimately, they were successful in laying the foundations of a permanent Italian settlement in rural Victoria, their lives proving enormously influential in determining future patterns of immigration. Today, there are few historical sites directly connected with these immigrants: some gravestones, Masciorini's store, 'Orange

Grove', Lardi's store, and perhaps the remains of 'The Garibaldi' gold mine. However, the strong Italian community of the Ovens Valley serves as a reminder of these pioneers who built a connection between the alpine valleys of northern Italy, and the Ovens Valley of Victoria.

Notes

- ¹ Templeton, J. 'The Swiss Connection: The Origins of the Valtellina-Australia Migrations', in *Australian Historical Studies*, Volume 26, Number 104, April 1995, p. 393.
- ² *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, Advertisement for White Star line of packets, 15 July, 1859.
- ³ Gentilli, J. *The Settlement of Swiss Ticino Immigrants in Australia*, Geowest Number 23, Department of Geography, University of Western Australia, 1988, p. 66, p. 125.
- ⁴ *Alpine Observer*, 'Obituary, Antonio Masciorini', 10 January, 1908.
- ⁵ Pers. comm. June Stanley, 1998; Gentilli, J. op. cit., p.125.
- ⁶ Gibney, B. & M. *Mudgegonga's Hall of Fame*, Mudgegonga, 1988, p. 37.
- ⁷ Goodman, D. *Gold Seeking, Victoria and California in the 1850s*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1994, p. xiv.
- ⁸ Broom, R. *The Victorians, Arriving*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, McMahon's Point, 1984, p. 70; Gentilli, J. op. cit., p. 3.
- ⁹ Templeton, J. op. cit., p. 399-401-2.
- ¹⁰ Templeton, J. ibid, p. 405.
- ¹¹ Templeton, J. ibid, p. 405.
- ¹² Broom, R. op. cit. p. 70.
- ¹³ Templeton, J. op. cit., p. 406-7.
- ¹⁴ Templeton, J. ibid, p. 404-5.
- ¹⁵ Sagazio, C. *Italian Craftsmanship in Australia*, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), Melbourne, 1990, p. 23.
- ¹⁶ *Alpine Observer*, op. cit.
- ¹⁷ Gentilli, J. op. cit., p. 6.
- ¹⁸ *Alpine Observer*, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ Pers. comm. June Stanley, 1998.
- ²⁰ D'Aprano, C. *From Goldrush to Federation - Italian Pioneers in Victoria*, Int Press, Pascoe Vale South, 1995, p. 164-5; Gibney, B. & M. op. cit. p. 36.
- ²¹ Lloyd, B. and Nunn, K. *Bright Gold*, Histec Publications, Brighton East, 1987, p. 91.
- ²² Gibney, B. & M. op. cit. p. 34; Cecilia, T. *We Didn't Arrive Yesterday*, Scalabrinians/Sunnyside Press, Red Cliffs, 1987, p. 188.
- ²³ De Piazza, P. *The History and Family Tree of Battista and Catherine De Piazza, 1870-1980*, Mudgegonga, 1980, p. iv, 1; Sagazio, C. op. cit., p. 27.
- ²⁴ Templeton, J. op. cit., p. 410-412; Reynolds, S. *Yackandandah*, Yackandandah Historical Society, n.d., p. 32.
- ²⁵ De Piazza, P. op. cit., p. 2.

²⁶ *Bailliere's Victorian Directory, Official Post Office Directory of Victoria*, Melbourne, 1868, 1870, listed Charles Larde as a carter at Growler's Creek; Lloyd, B. & Nunn, K. op. cit., p. 89.

²⁷ Templeton, J. op. cit., p. 397.

²⁸ *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, Advertisement, Beechworth Steam Sawmills, 12 January, 1864.

²⁹ Cecilia, T. op. cit. p. 189.

³⁰ De Piazza, P. op. cit., p. 2; pers. comm. Alan Crameri, 1988.

³¹ *Bailliere's Victorian Directory, Official Post Office Directory of Victoria*, Melbourne, 1875, 1880-1; De Piazza, p. op. cit., p. 2.

³² Pers. comm. John Masciorini, 1998.

³³ *The Alpine Gazette*, Notice, 13 May, 1881; Lloyd B. and Nunn, K. op. cit., p. 133.

³⁴ D'Aprano, C. op. cit., p. 167; Lloyd, B. and Nunn, K., 1987, p. 70; *Wise's Post Office Directory of Victoria, 1891-92*.

³⁵ Gentilli, J. op. cit., p. 6.

³⁷ Gibney, B. & M. op. cit., p. 37.

³⁸ De Piazza, P. op. cit., p. 3.

³⁹ Gibney, B. & M. op. cit., p. 34.

⁴⁰ It is unclear what became of Stefano Saligari after he sold his land at Mudgegonga, but in 1884, he is listed as a wine merchant in *Wise's Post Office Directory in Victoria*, establishing a wine shop at 150 Victoria Street, North Melbourne, appearing again in the 1888-1889 Directory.

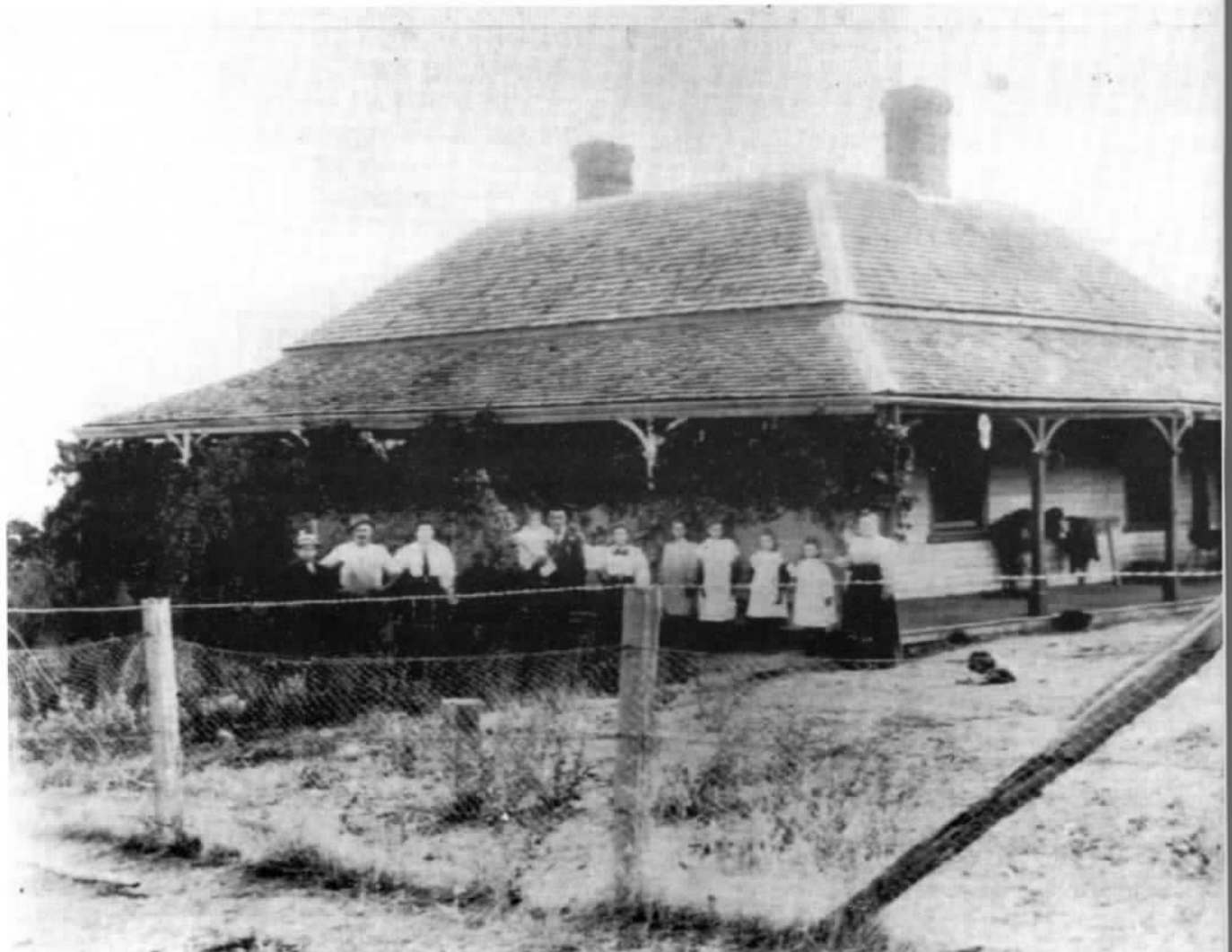
⁴¹ Robertson, K. *Myrtleford, Gateway to the Alps*, Rigby, Melbourne, 1973, p. 101.

⁴² *Wise's Post Office Directory*, 1884, 1888, 1891., Antonio Crameri is listed as 'Crammiry'.

⁴³ Lloyd B. and Nunn, K. op. cit., p. 133.

⁴⁴ However one cannot help but suspect that Masciorini's move may have also been precipitated by his wife's departure. A notice in the *Alpine Gazette*, 18 May, 1881, read 'My wife having left her home I will not be responsible for any debts contracted by her in my name after this date'. Mrs Masciorini died in 1891, and he subsequently remarried [*Alpine Observer*, 'Antonio Masciorini - Obituary' 10.1.1908].

⁴⁵ *Alpine Gazette*, 13 May, 1881.



Battista and Catherine De Piazza with their children in front of the family home 'Orange Grove'. From The History and Family Tree of Catherine and Battista De Piazza 1870-1980 by Patricia De Piazza, Mudgegonga, 1980.